No News Is Not-So-Good News

Foreground FA-18 photo by PH2 Donné McKissic
Sky photo by AT1 Gene Apodaca
Composited by Allan Amen

by LCdr. Jeffrey Winter

We usually think of the airborne phase of a sortie as the most likely time for a mishap. However, the risks start while you're still on deck, and a few moments of inattention can lead to extreme peril before a single aircraft is launched.

It was a hot, muggy day off the coast of North Carolina. We were busy participating in routine, pre-deployment workups. I was the mission commander for a strike into the BT-11 target area, which is only important because I had a lot on my mind and hadn't gotten as much sleep as I normally do.

Planning and briefing a strike during a major exercise was a pain in the rear, but other than that, nothing was unusual. Man-up, start and taxi all went according to the brief. I spread my wings just aft of cat 4, as the yellowshirt directed me into position behind the shuttle. This is the first time during the Hornet's launch sequence when you

must advance the throttles to power settings that are dangerous to those immediately behind the aircraft. On most days, I check the mirrors to make sure the JBD is elevated behind my aircraft. On this day, I did not.

I put power on the aircraft and engaged the shuttle. After the ordnance crew armed my missiles, the catapult operator placed my jet into tension, and I selected military power. For the next several seconds, I wiped out my controls, checked my engine instruments and flight-control computers, and carried out my personal pre-catapult ritual. I then looked up at the shooter and gave him a crisp salute. He did not salute back. Instead, he dropped to a knee and gave me the suspend signal.

I guessed that I'd forgotten to wipe out my rudders in a momentary lack of attention to detail. As I had been taught since flying the mighty T-2C Buckeye in 1990, I had no intention of retarding my throttles until someone was standing in front of my aircraft. Shortly thereafter, the Air Boss directed me to throttle back. It didn't sound like he was asking me to do him a favor. I relented, simply because I knew he would not ask me to do that unless someone was in imminent danger or already hurt.

I had no idea why I had been suspended. I was still in position on cat 4 when I heard a helicopter-search effort being directed on the tower frequency. No one was certain, but there was a chance that my jet exhaust had blown a Sailor overboard. The helos searched for approximately 15 minutes to no avail. I was getting only bits and pieces of information about the SAR effort, and, as a result, was growing more confused by the minute. My brain capacity had immediately been reduced to a maximum of two thoughts at any given time. First, there was a reasonable chance that I had hurt someone. Second, I hoped my morning coffee would kick in so I wouldn't have to wait long for my urinalysis. Not very sympathetic, I know, and clearly not the optimum allocation of cerebral assets.

I expected to taxi into one of the valet Hornet parking spots, but instead got a trip to the forward catapult. Fortunately, I remembered every discussion I had ever heard about the importance of compartmentalization. I had planned the strike, I had briefed the strike, and now I was going to lead the strike. Whatever had happened was obviously beyond my control, and the ship's chain-of-command decided it was OK to launch me on that event.

The flight went fine, and nothing was significant about the recovery, except that I most likely got robbed by the LSOs. Now that I was on deck and had a chance to collect my wits, the pieces of the puzzle started falling into place. When I engaged the shuttle and went into tension for the first time, the JBD never raised behind my aircraft. I hadn't blown anyone overboard, but two flight-deck crewmen had been injured. One had minor cuts and bruises; 20,000 pounds of thrust had blasted the other into a parked F-14. He suffered severe cuts and bruises and a cracked sternum.

My jet exhaust had also blown another Hornet into a parked Tomcat. The pilot of the Hornet had been my roommate on two cruises, and, ironically, we had witnessed a similar incident on a different ship several years before. In that case, an F-14 had blown another F-14 over the deck-edge scupper, and the aircrew ejected into the water. This time, my roommate was spared an ejection, but the frame of the FA-18 had bent so badly that the aircraft never flew again. The F-14, on the other hand, had only minor damage. Score one for Grumman.

Any number of people, including me, could have seen that the JBD was not raised when I engaged the catapult shuttle. Everyone, regardless of rank or title, who sees something wrong on the flight deck has the right and the obligation to stop what is happening.

I have witnessed a mishap of this nature in each of my two airwings. That is an eerie statistic. You may think that telling a catapult crew to remember to raise the JBD is akin to telling a dentist to brush his teeth, or a pilot to lower his gear for landing. Even though these tasks seem obvious, on this day, at least one of them was not. Mishap reports teach us that the most routine tasks are often the easiest to overlook.

In spite of being shaken by the events on the flight deck, I flew a mission and recovered an aircraft on the ship in Case III. Compartmentalize external factors, and don't turn one mishap into two.

LCdr. Winter flies with VFA-86.